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GRIM TRUTH.

A Short Story.

By ALEXIA AGNES VIAL.



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JAMES WILLIAM WILLIAMS, D.D.,
BISHOP OF QUEBEC.

GRIM TRUTH.

BY ALEXIA AGNES VIAL.

CHAPTER I.

"I never felt myself....so thirsty for improvement as to desire that all my acquaintances should give me their candid opinion of me."

—GEORGE ELIOT.

A FEW years ago, a country town—Edgevale, we will call it—was visited by a strange and alarming epidemic. Edgevale is in the Western Hemisphere, but I do not mention latitude and longitude, lest I should wound the sensibilities of some of my fellow-creatures, for there are not many people who lived through that terrible time that could be brought to acknowledge the fact, unless they happened to be among the very few who escaped the disease.

Although it only lasted one short week, and did not prove fatal any of its victims, leaving them in perfect bodily health, still, with very few exceptions, the sufferers all left their old home and scattered in different directions, as far from their former friends, acquaintances and even relations, as they could possibly get. I have little doubt that some may have emigrated as far as the North Pole, and others might probably be found domesticated among the savages of Central Africa; but in case there are some of them living within reach of civilization, I think it better to write cautiously, for I cannot bear to hurt people's feelings. I know that if I had gone through the same affliction, I should never have been able to hold up my head again.

Of course, the vacant places caused by the exodus were soon filled by other people, and there are a few of the former inhabitants left to tell the tale, and it is from them that I have gathered the facts I am about to record,—a few of the facts, I should have said, as it would be impossible to mention all the particulars I heard, so I will just make use of those cases which appeared to me most interesting.

After my arrival in Edgevale—I was travelling for my health—on hearing of the scourge which had been sent upon the place, I consulted the old doctor there, who had passed through the ordeal unscathed, as to the possibility of a recurrence of the malady ; but he honestly confessed himself to have been completely baffled by it, and refused to give an opinion, saying it was beyond the reach of his profession. I naturally felt nervous, for, besides being in weak health and therefore susceptible to anything contagious, I was boarding in a house which had been occupied by some of the worst cases—people who had since emigrated, it was thought, to the South Sea Islands. I had hoped to find out from the doctor if the disease were really infectious, but he gruffly told me he knew absolutely nothing about it, had never seen anything like it before or since, and very seldom came across even symptoms suggestive of the complaint, except in children under nine years of age.

He concluded with exclaiming, “ More’s the pity ! ” So I supposed at the time that he would like to have an opportunity of studying the trouble for the benefit of his profession.

“ It’s a metaphysician, not a mere physician, you should consult, young man,” he said jocularly, as I was taking my leave, “ if you can find one.”

I did not stay very long in the place after my interview with the doctor, as I felt, in case anything happened, I should prefer to be near a medical man who would be more reasoning, but I remained long enough to make a few interesting acquaintances, and learn the facts which, as I said before, I am about to record.

A few days before the epidemic declared itself, Edgevale had been shaken by earthquakes, and there had been some very severe thunder and lightning storms which had done considerable damage. It remains an open question whether these calamities had anything to do with the other visitation, but in some minds they are supposed to be the origin of it. Of course, people will be superstitious.

It seems, one bright morning during the hot season, the inhabitants of Edgevale awoke to find that they had lost control over their powers of speech. Now, I do not mean that they could not speak distinctly, but that they did not say the words they wanted. Not in the way some people are affected in paralysis by using senseless words while their ideas are clear, but by being compelled to say what they really thought and felt instead of the things they would like to say. In short, they were stricken with Truth. They were obliged to be uncompromisingly and absolutely sincere for one long week ! (A little while ago I called the week short, but then I was not speaking from the sufferers' point of view.) Now, consider what that means ! Just imagine how the best of us would feel if we heard our tongues telling out our inmost thoughts in direct opposition to an order from the brain !

Poor Edgevaleites ! What must their sufferings have been ! What wonder was it that, after they had undergone such sufferings, they fled away as far from their old haunts and old neighbors as possible ! And the worst of it is the world is so small now, that it is difficult to find a place where a person will not meet somebody who knows somebody else who knows all about him.

CHAPTER II.

"He is a strong man who can hold down his opinion."

—EMERSON.

It was Mrs. Johnson's cook who first discovered that "folks acted strange," when she went to take the milk from the milkman. She was "put out" that morning, for Mrs. Johnson was to have a large garden party in the afternoon, and she had been cooking the day before more than she thought her contract compelled her to do.

"How much water did you put in this morning, Jerry?" she asked, and was surprised when he replied:—

"About half and half, ma'am."

She thought he was laughing it off, but the distressed look on his face surprised her, and she wondered why he hurried away so fast instead of staying to have a chat.

A short time after a stout tramp came along limping with a bound up foot, and asked for some breakfast. Jane was a liberal woman and kind-hearted, so she began to cut some of her mistress' bread and butter and cold ham and pour out some coffee; but, being a little put out, as I said before, she gave the man his breakfast and a piece of her mind at the same time.

"Now, why in the world don't a great big large man like you work for a livin' instead o' beggin' this way?"

"I don't like work. That's why," was the answer.

Jane glanced at the man, and thought the poor fellow must be ill, he looked so queer.

"What's the matter with your foot?" she asked in gentler tone.

"Nothin'," the man gasped, but he looked worse than before.

"He's off his head with the pain, poor thing," said the impulsive Jane to herself.

“Let me do it up for you more comfortable like. You wouldn’t be bandaging your foot for nothing, I’m sure ;” and she came nearer.

“Oh ! yes, I would. It pays better.” He put his foot up and sat on it, while he devoured his breakfast with an expression in his eyes, such as one may see in those of a hungry dog who is gnawing a bone he is afraid of losing.

“Look here, my man, you may take yourself off. What do you mean by asking me for breakfast when you are well and strong enough to earn your own livin’ ?”

“I told you I didn’t like work.” Then a crafty gleam came into the man’s eyes. “Hes the pleeceman ben here lately hevin’ tea ?” he asked.

Poor Jane ! She wanted to deny it, but instead of that she heard her own voice saying :—

“Yes, he was here last night.”

She had to go into the dining room after that to lay the table for breakfast, so the tramp made a comfortable meal at his leisure, and pocketed a few silver spoons, as his unwilling honesty of speech did not extend to his deeds ; after which he left the house and the neighborhood, and was never seen again.

Jane said as little as possible all day, but she did her work so well that her mistress had very little occasion to speak to her. Mrs. Johnson attributed her silence to sullenness, but was quite willing to overlook that as long as she did her work well.

“Oh ! if she will only not give warning till after I’ve recovered from the tennis party, it will be all right,” said the poor lady to her husband.

Entertaining a large number of one’s mere acquaintances is a task which has made even phlegmatic people “hot all over” in the depth of winter ; but imagine the feelings of an emotional lady, who had issued one hundred and fifty invitations, nearly all to comparative strangers,

when the thermometer registered 90° in the shade, and her servants showed a rebellious spirit !

The Johnsons were new-comers in the place, and this was their first piece of hospitality on a large scale since their arrival, in return for a whole winter of invitations. They were a sociable couple who like to have their intimate friends drop in without ceremony, and hardly ever sat down to a *tête-à-tête* dinner, and the favoured few who frequented their house did not expect to be entertained ; so it was not surprising that Mrs. Johnson felt that she must be on her good behaviour, and dreaded the arrival of her own guests on this great occasion. It was particularly unfortunate that the epidemic should have broken out just the day of her party. If it had been a day sooner the hostess would have been spared even the attempt to entertain, for her guests would have been too shy to appear in society had they known what was wrong with them.

She first noticed something strange when Miss Watkins, the heiress, who was sitting on the verandah a few feet from her, burst into tears while talking to a young bank clerk to whom she was engaged. Only a few guests had arrived, and there seemed to be some difficulty among the tennis players, and no one would begin to play. To avoid noticing a lover's quarrel, Mrs. Johnson left the verandah and joined the little group at the tennis court.

" I suppose you are all afraid of sunstroke this hot day," she said, instead of the little bit of pleasantry she had prepared, and she noticed that they all looked excited, while some of the girls had tears in their eyes.

There was a silence of some moments, broken at last by a warm-looking stout gentleman in a soiled tennis suit, whose eye she caught.

" You may well say so," puffed he ; " and besides that, these girls here have had the impertinence to tell me that I can't play at all. The fact is, they like the young men better, and so I told them, and they had to acknowledge it, too."

"Well, I am not surprised at that," said Mrs. Johnson with engaging simplicity, while her indignant guest gazed at her speechless with astonishment. "Perhaps it would be better to wait till it is a little cooler for a game. It is quite pleasant on the verandah. Come, Mr. Temple," to the stout gentleman, "and rest a little before exerting yourself. At your age, a man should be very careful."

Roused at finding himself addressed, the poor man, whose looks suggested an attack of apoplexy, turned on his heel with a snort, and walked away to a summer house, where an elderly young lady was sitting alone.

Mrs. Johnson then turned to a handsome young fellow in flannels, who was looking very uncomfortable.

"You must get these young ladies some ice cream, Mr. Jenkins," she said to him; but as there was no response, she turned to the excited girls and said, much against her will:—

"You all look as if you had been quarrelling. What is the matter?"

"He said playing tennis with ladies was awfully stupid, unless they were uncommonly good players or particularly nice girls," answered the prettiest of the group, glancing at the uncomfortable young man.

That poor unfortunate, who would have been grateful to the earth if it had swallowed him, bowed without his accustomed grace to his hostess, as she turned to him with a look of distress, and then to the aggrieved girls, and walked off the grounds and out at the gate, without a word.

New arrivals claimed Mrs. Johnson's attention just then, and came in such numbers that there was not much opportunity for conversation; but she could not help noticing that some of the first arrivals were going away without bidding her good-bye. Some of the more courageous ones, however, ventured to take leave of her, among them an overdressed lady and her two daughters.

"You are hurrying away very soon," said the hostess. "I am afraid you have not enjoyed yourself."

"No, not at all," said the over-dressed lady, who was nervously skaking hands with Mrs. Johnson at the time.

That little ceremony came to a very abrupt end, and the two ladies stared at each other for a moment, while one of the daughters exclaimed: "I told you how it would be, Ma."

"I am sorry you have been disappointed," came with an effort at last from Mrs. Johnson.

"Disappointed!—I never expected to enjoy myself," returned the other, growing a deeper red than before.

"Then why did you come?"

"Because I thought it would be advantageous for the girls to be seen at your house."

This was complimentary in a way, and Mrs. Johnson knew that it was sincere; but it caused her a pang too, for she felt sure that experience would teach these ambitious people that there was very little advantage to be derived from her entertainments.

She gave her hand to the daughters in turn, mustering a smile as she said kindly:—

"Well, I hope next time you come you will have more amusement. I think gentlemen are always lazy in hot weather."

"Nothing in the world would induce us to come again," said the elder girl, while the younger one exclaimed:—

"Do tell us why you did it!"

"Did what, my dear?"

"Invited us here to be treated this way."

"I gave a party because I wanted to gain influence in society," faltered the hostess. "If anything unpleasant has occurred, it is not my fault. I hoped that every one would have a happy afternoon, and I cannot understand why people behave so rudely."

"Come, Bessie, everybody is going," said the mother. "You'll only hear some more disagreeable things about 'upstarts' if you stay. I understand it all; they just meant to snub us."

"No, really—" began Mrs. Johnson; but her husband came up at that moment and prevented any further conversation.

"Emily, Miss Wade is in hysterics down in the summer house," he said hurriedly, and she saw by his ruffled countenance that his afternoon's work had been as hard as hers.

"What has happened, Jack? Perhaps Dr. Selwood had better see her."

"Oh! dear no! He would do her more harm than good. She's had a row with old Temple. The old fool asked her her age, and she told him the Truth, now she thinks she's seriously ill, and wants a vehicle to take her home."

"Have you ordered one?"

"Yes, I did so before I came for you."

They were hurrying through the grounds as they spoke. Such pretty grounds they were, with gay flowers dotted at intervals through them, and many bright rugs and painted chairs and seats for the accommodation of the guests, besides the picturesque refreshment tents. But the distressed faces of the guests were sadly out of keeping with the festive scene, and Mrs. Johnson noticed that instead of cheerful conversation and laughter there was a sullen silence among some of them, while from other groups she could hear the sound of angry voices.

As she neared the summer house with her husband, they saw the rubicund Mr. Temple coming towards it too from one of the tents, with a glass of ice cream in his hand.

Mr. Johnson walked over to him quickly, while his better half joined Miss Wade.

"Look here, Temple, you'd better keep out of the way till Miss Wade gets a carriage," he said. "You'll only excite her again. I'll give her the ice cream," and he held out his hand for it.

Mr. Temple drew back indignantly.

"I'd like to know who has the best right to attend to the wishes of that lady, sir, you or I?"

"I have, most certainly, since she is my guest, and you have already been the means of giving her a fit, or something like it, by your stupidity."

In response, Mr. Temple glared at his companion, and started again towards the summer house.

Mr. Johnson heard an excited female voice from that direction, and in his anxiety to prevent any further trouble, stepped in front of his guest and tried again to take the ice cream.

"I say now you mustn't be a fool, Temple," he said; "give me that stuff and I'll give it to her."

In avoiding his host's outstretched hand, Mr. Temple spilt some of the ice cream on his tennis shoes, and his rage knew no bounds.

"Confound you for a meddlesome brute!" he roared. "I'd *kick* you if—if—if—I wasn't afraid."

Mr. Johnson burst into a loud laugh as he looked down at the poor excited little man, whose face wore an expression akin to despair as he said the last words.

"Why in the world won't you let me take that ice cream to Miss Wade, like a sensible man? I only wish to avoid any more rows. I don't——"

"Rows, sir, rows! I would give you to understand that Miss Wade has promised to be my wife."

Mr. Johnson was speechless for a few moments.

"Upon my word that beats all I ever heard!" he said when he had recovered himself. "Why didn't you tell me that before?" and he stepped aside. "But how is it you decided so hastily after asking her rude questions? I wonder she had anything to say to you."

"You've no business to wonder at anything. Miss Wade is a woman of sense, sir, and the most candid person I ever saw. Told me her age

right out, and how many of your society women would do that !—and she quite agrees with me that the girls of the present day are not sufficiently retiring and are wanting in judgment.”

“ Well, Temple, let me congratulate you. I think it’s the best thing that could have happened. Much more sensible than hanging round pretty girls young enough to be your daughters.”

In spite of these kind words the happy man looked decidedly warlike as he allowed his host to shake him by the hand.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Johnson had gone to Miss Wade, whom she found flushed, but comparatively calm, with a triumphant expression in her eye, which she (Mrs. Johnson) was at a loss to account for.

“ I’m so sorry, dear, that you’ve been so annoyed by that dreadful Mr. Temple. He has no more manners than a dancing bear. Your carriage will be here soon, so come with me to the house.”

Miss Wade drew herself up and looked dangerous as she answered :—

“ It is very painful to me to hear you speak in that way of Mr. Temple. Do please go away and don’t let him find you here.”

“ I can quite understand that you don’t care to hear his name mentioned. But surely, even he would not be so stupid as to tease you again. At any rate I’m not afraid of him, and I’ll stay with you til you are ready to go.”

Naturally this sympathy was not appreciated by its object, who, much to Mrs. Johnson’s distress, broke into sobs and then gasped rather loudly :—

“ It was always this way ! Whenever anything like this happened to me, some woman was sure to spoil it all by her interference.”

“ Spoil what ? I thought you would be glad to have me with you just now.”

“ I am not at all glad. If he sees you here he won’t like to come, and who knows but he may change his mind.”

“ But do you wish Mr. Temple to come ? ”

“ Yes, he told me to wait till he fetched me some ice cream.”

"Oh ! well, never mind. Even if he does forget, and it would be just like him to do so, Jack will get you anything you like."

The sobs broke forth again, and Mrs. Johnson lost patience.

"To think of a woman of your age making such a fuss about a little ice cream !"

"I don't care for the ice cream a bit. I——"

"Well, what do you want ? What do you care for ?"

"Mr. Temple," answered Miss Wade sullenly. "He said he would come back to me in a few minutes."

"Is it possible you wish him to come, after the way he behaved ?"

"I think he behaved very nicely," returned the other, as she wiped her eyes, and arranged her collar.

"Then I must have been misinformed. Jack told me he had been rude. What did he say to you ?"

"He asked me to marry him," answered the tormented lady, "since you must know everything."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Wade, for my rudeness. Jack must have misunderstood. It is really refreshing to see some one happy this dreadful weather," and she left the summer house and joined her husband who had just separated from Mr. Temple.

"Our assistance was not required, Jack," she said, as they walked back to the house, and then she heard Mr. Temple's side of the question, and the two laughed heartily for the first time that terrible afternoon.

They returned to the house to find that all their guests had escaped except the old doctor, the one I consulted, who was standing on the steps with a puzzled smile on his face.

Jane, from the seclusion of a refreshment tent, had heard and seen a great deal without interruption, for no one had required her services but Mr. Temple.

"Lord have mercy on us !" she cried, devoutly crossing herself, "they are all took the same way ! I won't give warning now, for the end of

the world is not far off, that's certain sure!—and all these elegant refreshments will be wasted!”

Mrs. Johnson's laugh became rather hysterical as she realized in a measure what had befallen her, and it was only the good doctor's firm handling and her husband's immediate decision to leave Edgevale at once which kept her up.

“I wonder why the Chesters did not come,” she said, after she had rested a little and taken a biscuit and a glass of wine. “Things would not have been so terrible, I am sure, if they had been here. Mrs. Chester is so amiable and her husband has so much tact—he always says the right thing. I hope he is not ill.”

Mr. Chester was the young rector of one of the largest churches in Edgevale.

Dr. Selwood smiled. “I saw him this morning,” he said, “and he looked remarkably well. Perhaps he has lost his tact like the rest of your friends and discovered his condition in time.”

“And then Dr. Jewell—he is such a ladies man. He would have been invaluable.”

“I noticed that his rooms were to let as I came here; but he was in the best of spirits last night at the club, and I know his practice is very large.”

“What has come over everybody, Dr. Selwood? Will it be like this wherever we go?”

The doctor put up his finger.

“If you talk any more you will not be rested for your move.” Then rising. “I must be off now; so good-bye, Mrs. Johnson, but you will see me in the morning. Keep as quiet as possible, you know; don't tire yourself talking.”

Mr. Johnson accompanied his kind friend to the gate, where they saw Miss Wade and Mr. Temple getting into the conveyance which had been ordered for the use of the former alone.

“There,” said the doctor, when he had heard the story of the betro-

thal. "You see, some people are happier already for the new state of things. I am sure that if real downright candour were the fashion, society would be ever so much pleasanter, and of course more wholesome. There's too much humbug altogether."

"Of course there is, but wait till the millennium before you do away with it entirely. I have had enough candour this afternoon to last me a long time. I can't say I should like every Tom, Dick and Harry to tell me just what they think of me, or to show me too clearly what they are themselves. In this world perfect sincerity can only exist between very dear friends or very deadly enemies, and one person cannot have a very large circle of either, so a little humbug among one's acquaintances is inevitable. We did without it this afternoon, and you can't call the result a success."

"Things haven't got into working order yet. Society is in a state of transition. Wait till Truth is firmly established here, and Edgevale will be the happiest and most prosperous place on the face of the globe!"

If it does business with the rest of the world I am skeptical as to the prosperity. But I shall not be here to see, and I doubt if there will be much society left to be purified. I, for my part, am not anxious to see any of my fellow-citizens again, except yourself, doctor, and I expect they will be as shy of me."

"You are a new comer, but I should think people who have taken root here would hardly leave their homes because they are obliged to speak the Truth!"

"Well, you must write and tell me how Edgevale prospers. I will give you our new address before we go away."

CHAPTER III.

"The mind as well as the body has its self protecting instincts."

—CHARLES READE.

THE morning after the tennis party there were no daily papers issued, and when Mr. Johnson went down to the printing office to advertise his house, he found everything closed. As he was looking round for some one to explain this state of things, he caught sight of a reporter connected with the establishment at the corner of the streets. He had often had a friendly chat with this young man, and he was pleased to see somebody who could give him some information, and accordingly advanced towards him. But to his dismay, when the reporter saw him drawing near, he vanished down another street. Mr. Johnson quickened his steps and turned the corner, and when his friend of a day or two before saw that he was pursued, he took to his heels and ran with all his might.

It would be impossible to mention all the difficulties the Johnsons encountered before they were able to take their departure. Hardly any one was willing to do business with them, and so many people were in the midst of moving, too, that there seemed to be very little prospect of letting their house. At last—it seemed a long time to them before the happy day arrived—they got away, taking with them the now faithful Jane, who was a model of silent industry when not telling her beads, and leaving their house with a placard on its walls and its gates, on which was printed :—

HOUSE TO LET.

Apply to Dr. Selwood,
460 South Street.

The doctor helped his friends off much against his will, for he was very reluctant to lose them, and disappointed to find that so few had the courage or desire to brave the trouble out. His services were required as a go-between with some trades people and others who avoided a personal interview, for the Edgevale people had grown accustomed to the doctor's frank and sometimes gruff ways, and he was known in almost every home.

During the week the epidemic raged, his time was more fully taken up in a variety of ways than it had ever been in his professional capacity, though he had never been an idle man. He told Mr. Johnson in his first letter to him that no Holy Father had ever been so burdened with confessions as he was, and he was more than ever anxious for things to adjust themselves. He knew the addresses of almost every one who left the town, but, of course, he was bound in honour not to reveal them, and he could often say: "What fun it will be for the public if ever I get brain fever; and if this kind of thing lasts much longer, I shall certainly have it."

He was almost single-handed in his work among the sufferers, for young Dr. Jewell, who had had a large practice, had left the place very suddenly.

The morning of the famous "at home," he had called, as usual, on a wealthy lady patient who had suffered for some time from a nervous complaint. It was a very warm day, and she was fretful, as people are apt to be who spend most of their time in the house wrapped in self-contemplation. She had found Dr. Selwood too blunt and bracing for her disorder, and when Dr. Jewell appeared on the scene, she thought he was all his name expressed, and in a short time his daily visits to her were an institution.

"When shall I be well, Dr. Jewell? I am tired of this. When shall I be able to go about like other women?" she demanded, without her usual docility.

"You are quite well now, physically," he answered, while his

handsome face became very red, and he looked longingly at the door ;
“ and there is no reason why you should not fulfil all the duties of your position, if you liked to set about it.”

She looked at him in surprise for a moment, and then her face brightened.

“ Oh ! you are going to try that new treatment you were speaking of the other day. Tell me how to set about it, for I should dearly like to be a strong woman again. Do sit down, doctor ! ”

“ No treatment is necessary ; you are a strong woman now.”

“ How can I ever thank you, then, for all your care ! The moment I awoke this morning I felt different, and could not understand how it was. It's all your doing, dear Dr. Jewell,” she exclaimed with enthusiasm, “ you have cured me by your untiring zeal.”

“ Not at all, not at all——”

“ Oh ! you are too modest now, doctor. Do sit down. Why, how does it come about that I am well to-day after being an invalid for months ? ”

“ You were well enough all the time,” and the polished man of the world chewed his fair moustache, and kneaded his hat in his hand till it was shapeless

The invalid sat bolt upright in her cushioned chair, and asked with flashing eyes :—

“ Then why did you come here to attend me so regularly, pray ? ”

“ Because ”—he tried to keep back the words, but they would come—

“ Because you wanted me, and——”

“ I wanted you to make me well,” she interrupted ; “ but if I was not ill, what did you come for ? ”

“ My fee——” He grasped his poor crumpled hat, and made his escape down the stair and out into the street, where he presented such a startling appearance that a policeman at hand would certainly have kept him in sight, had he not been afraid it might lead to conversation. So the poor doctor made the best of his way home unmolested, and lost no time in making arrangements to leave the town.

That same morning Mr. Chester, whose non-appearance at the tennis party Mrs. Johnson had so deplored, was very busy among his poorer parishioners.

I will not distress the reader with a detailed account of what occurred. The people of the lower class acted differently while under the new influence from their more refined fellow-citizens, and, instead of avoiding one another, nearly all of them seemed anxious to have it out, and gain all the information that they could possibly gather from their afflicted neighbours. The eagerness with which some of them would listen to the disclosure of secrets detrimental to the character and well-being of their friends was disheartening to the hard-working clergyman, and when, after frankly interchanging their opinions of each other, they would resort to blows, he felt himself utterly helpless. He could do nothing to make peace even when tongues alone were in use, for he discovered that he was far too frank himself, and the respect and affection his parishioners bore him was not of a sufficiently tough material to endure after they heard how he despised their low ways. The clamour and noise in the street was awful, and he could find no policeman anywhere to appeal to ; so when he returned home he frightened his poor wife by the worn and awe-stricken look on his face.

" Oh ! Fred, you look as dreadful as everybody else. All the town is going mad, I do believe."

" Yes, it seems like it—but I wish to be alone," and he avoided further conversation by shutting himself up in his study.

The next day he and his wife went to the country, where they stayed for the rest of the week, only returning on Saturday for the Sunday duty. As they drove homeward through the now quiet streets, they saw notices on some of the churches of other denominations, to the effect that the services would be discontinued for the present.

" Fred," said the lady, " hadn't you better follow their example ? "

" No, dear," answered her husband. " With our beautiful liturgy,

the service will be a comfort to many, I am sure. If it depended upon myself I would undertake it."

"But the sermon!"

"I have sermons by other men better than anything I could write, and I will read one of them. Of course, I will explain how it is."

On Sunday, poor Mrs. Chester felt all the sympathetic nervousness, as she took her seat in church, which is undergone by most women whose male relatives occupy public positions. But, as her husband had said, the service was a comfort to the small number present, who looked as if they had "gone through something." The congregation consisted of a few frequenters of each of the closed churches besides a sprinkling of Mr. Chester's own people. The choir consisted entirely of boys, as none of the basses and tenors had remained in town; but the singing was sweet and fresh, though not so full as usual, and the service was quite a success.

The rector had nothing original to say except the notices and the preface to the sermon.

"My friends," he wished to begin when in the pulpit, but as he looked round the church, he saw very few who could with strict accuracy be called by that name. "Dear brethren" seemed equally difficult to say, though he knew that, in a sense, they were all brothers and sisters, but, while he failed to realize the fact, it was impossible to use the words. He thought of "Dear people," but the first word was out of the question, as there were only one or two people in the church who were dear to him, and "people" alone would never do.

There was a pause that Mr. Chester thought would never end, during which these thoughts passed through his mind, as he tried to prepare his little introduction.

How readily the "dearly beloved" had slipped from his tongue only the Sunday before, and now he could not have uttered the words to save his life! What a judgment had befallen him for saying more

than he meant, or not meaning what he said, thought he ; and then and there he began to preach himself a little sermon.

“ It is not the words that are too extravagant,” he said to himself, and the silence grew unendurable to his poor wife ; “ but the fault is in me, that I do not feel all that they express.”

Never was so short a sermon preached in a pulpit before.

After that he braced himself to say the following :—

“ I am going to give to-day a sermon of an eminent Christian now living, instead of words of my own. I have no doubt you all know my reason for doing this, and it is my earnest prayer that when I speak to you straight from the heart, you and I alike will have profited by the lesson we are now learning.”

Mrs. Chester breathed freely again, while her husband began the discourse he had selected, and Dr. Selwood found it hard to suppress a jubilant “ Hear, Hear.” It was the first instance of moral courage the doctor had seen to refresh him since the epidemic broke out, and he began to hope again that better times were in store for Edgevale. He had always considered that the young rector was too plausible, and his careful way of choosing his words used to irritate the plain-spoken doctor, who preferred a little recklessness in a young man ; while, on the other hand, Mr. Chester found the doctor wanting in polish, though he held him in high esteem. But after the service I have described, a firm friendship was established between the two. The doctor dined at the rectory that memorable Sunday, and they agreed to work together among the sufferers.

CHAPTER IV.

"The world's grown honest.
Then is doomsday near."

—SHAKSPERE.

MR. CHESTER'S church and choir had sustained a severe loss in the departure of a successful lawyer—one of the tenors I mentioned as being missing from the service, or perhaps I should say the proprietor of one of the tenor voices.

It was a particularly sad case, as he left a wife and young children to mourn his loss. But this is not an obituary notice, so I must explain how it came about. He was engaged in defending a man who had embezzled large amounts from his employer, and in his speech to the judge and jury had gone over to the other side in quite a brilliant piece of oratory. He was in an agony himself, and tried hard to use the arguments he had remained awake the night before to prepare, but in vain. The other words would come, and at last amid hisses and groans from the prisoner's friends, who were naturally displeased, and loud laughter from everybody else, he made his way through the crowd to the door, and ran bareheaded down the street, followed by a crowd of boys. On and on he went through the town, out into the country beyond. The crowd following became thinner as he hurried on, but some of the bigger boys came home late for dinner that day, and the last that was heard of the poor lawyer was from them. He was still running when they gave up the chase and retraced their steps, and had gone some miles from the town.

The poor deserted wife and children were left badly off, but they had two friends in the parson and the doctor. No stone was left

unturned to find the truant husband, but he was never heard of again, and his wife, or widow, is a saddened, white-haired woman now, living entirely for her children.

Dr. Selwood undertook to provide for the education of the boys, and he sent them to the High School of the town, which was conducted by a friend of his, a Mr. Ingram.

The arrival of the epidemic proved a great relief to this Mr. Ingram, for all his most troublesome pupils became truthful ; and although it thinned out his school very much, owing to the departure of so many families, still he found his work infinitely more congenial than before, particularly as it came just in time to help him out of a great difficulty.

" Now, boys," he began, as he took his place before his pupils on the morning of the first day of the epidemic. " I hope to-day will see an end to this disagreeable state of things. One word from the right boy will set you all free. I am ashamed to think there is any one among you who can see so many others punished for his fault—must I ask you each in turn, or will the boy who knows most about it speak like a man ? "

There was a silence, during which the assistant looked on with a superior smile, as if he would act very differently under the circumstances.

" Do you know anything about the breakage of the window in the lecture room, Dudley ? " the principal asked of a nervous-looking boy, who avoided his glance.

" No, sir."

His suspicions were aroused, and he felt himself compelled to say :—

" Why can't you look me in the face ? "

" Because you look as if you didn't believe me, sir."

The boy looked so unhappy that the master took no more notice of him, but blamed himself for asking the second question.

" Smith, did you break that window ? "

"No, sir."

"Talbot?"

"No, sir."

"Littlefield?"

"No, sir."

"Benson?"

"Yes—sir?" The boy last addressed spoke the words as if asking a question, but he changed colour, while he looked back at the master with more courage than ease.

"I am speaking of the breakage of the window in the lecture room."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know anything about it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you break it?"

"Yes, sir."

Benson's legs were twisted round those of his chair, and he hacked at the desk with his knife, in a helpless way, while the despair on his face was almost pathetic, for telling the truth was a new and painful experience to him.

"Why did you not tell me at once, instead of causing all this trouble?"

"Because I wanted you to think it was Simpson," answered the boy, staring at an ink spot on his desk, while he was conscious of the gaze of a hundred pair of eyes.

"I will see you after school, Benson," said Mr. Ingram, sternly; "and now to work all of you," for the boys were inclined to become disorderly at hearing these wonderful confessions from such a character as Benson.

The morning passed very easily. There was no cheating in the lessons, and a great deal of awe-struck silence among the bad boys, who soon discovered that they could not trust themselves to speak. The master's spirits revived as he noticed the improved state of things,

and a wonderful amount of work was got through that day. During the week, of course, he lost a number of pupils; but in spite of that, he was quite proud of his school, and when I saw him he spoke of the epidemic as one of the greatest blessings that had ever befallen him in his *professional* capacity. He had, of course, suffered some social inconvenience.

CHAPTER V.

“ For love will still be lord of all.”

—SCOTT.

ONE day towards the end of the week I write about, a young girl might have been seen strolling along a country road in the vicinity of Edgevale with no companion but a large mastiff dog. Solitude was a thing so much sought for by everyone at that time, that her lonely appearance excited no remark. She was a pretty, slender girl, with soft grey eyes, and a proudly sensitive mouth. She might have been called beautiful, if it had not been for the paleness of her face and the troubled look on her fair white forehead. She held the huge dog by the collar as if she found comfort in his presence, and he walked quietly by her side in sympathetic silence, occasionally glancing up at her face as if he felt that he was in her confidence.

A few days before he had been her only confidant. All the little (?) worries, vexations and griefs, inseparable from young ladyhood, had been poured into his softly-flapping ears, and he had never seemed in the least bored by them. He had always taken her part against everybody, if the expression of his eyes could be relied upon, and best of all had never repeated a word.

But during the last day or two, dreadful things had happened. When her brother Joe teased her because she looked sad and sentimental, she had told him things that even Nero had never heard, and that she had only half known herself. While she thought no one knew her trouble, it seemed quite easy to bear. It was nobody's business if she lay awake most of the night, as long as she was ready to pour out her brother's coffee in the morning, and attend to her invalid mother. She was just as full of fun as ever, apparently, and the life of every party she went to, so that she often wondered at herself for not caring more. Then one morning Joe tormented her till she said things she could have killed herself for saying, and Joe too—Joe especially. So the cruel wound was opened, and she knew of its existence as she never would have done if prying eyes had not found it out.

"Oh! Nero. You're my only friend. You're the only person in the world that isn't hateful," she said, as she took a seat on the grass by the roadside, under the elm trees.

Her faithful friend stretched himself at her side, and laid his head on her lap, while he caressed her hand and gazed at her with a devotion in his eyes such as only a dog can feel for a human being.

Her head dropped upon his great neck, and she cried as if her heart would break.

A low growl from her companion roused her, and looking up she saw a speck in the distance which looked like a man on a bicycle. Rising quickly she dried her eyes, straightened her hat, and turned to walk in the same direction as the bicyclist was riding, so that it would not be necessary to meet him face to face, and devoutly hoping it might prove to be no one she knew.

She felt a strange nervousness as the soft whirl of the wheels sounded near, and she turned her head and looked across the fields in the opposite direction from that whence the sound came. The whirling sound suddenly stopped, and with a jerk the rider almost stumbled off the bicycle, exclaiming :—

"Why, Louie! were you going to cut me? I knew who you were when I was ever so far away, because of Nero. Here, Nero, old fellow!"

The bicyclist was young, and his handsome brown face fairly beamed with health. His flannel suit showed off his compact figure to advantage, and there was a brightness in his dark eyes and a glow upon his face, which was perhaps accounted for by the exertion of coming up the hill. He was not tall, but his build and carriage were so manly that his rather low stature was hardly a disadvantage, and his head was set on his shoulders like that of a young prince,—I mean, as we suppose young princes' heads ought to be set on.

The young girl bent over the dog and spoke to him, taking his collar in her hand again, as the young man walked beside her, pushing the bicycle.

"I was wondering when in the world I was going to meet you again," he continued. "How fortunate that I came across you now. I didn't see you at Mrs. Johnson's party."

"No, I didn't go. Is it true that she has gone away?"

"Yes, didn't you hear about that?"

"Joe told me she had gone, but we've seen so little of anybody this week that I've heard no particulars. Nobody has called, and I haven't cared about going into town. I suppose her party was a farewell affair."

"No, I don't think she had any idea of going away before it came off."

"What made her decide so suddenly?" asked the girl in surprise.

"She was so disgusted with the way everybody behaved," and he turned to look at the landscape. "What a lovely view one gets from this rising ground."

"Yes, it's very pretty. But how did her guests behave? I thought the party was to be very select."

"Yes, all the nice people were there, but they didn't all behave nicely," and he looked uncomfortable.

"Do tell me all about it. What happened?" she said, turning her face for the first time upon him.

Her eyes had lost the traces of recent tears to a great extent, though they had a heavy look which added to their softness, and her cheeks were still flushed from the surprise of his sudden appearance, while the soft brown hair beneath her sailor hat was tossed in a picturesque way which increased her beauty.

He was looking uneasy when she turned to him in questioning surprise, but his look of embarrassment gave place to a wistful glance of such respectful tenderness that she turned away again. Unconsciously, he moved nearer to her, without answering her question.

"You were at the party yourself, were you not?" she asked with a heightened colour.

"Yes—I wonder how long this hot weather is going to last."

"It was very hot the day of Mrs. Johnson's tennis party. Were there any good games?"

"No, I don't think they played at all."

"You speak as if you had nothing to do with it. Did you not play?"

"No, I didn't go near the grounds."

"You are so reticent about it, I shall think you behaved rudely too, and helped to drive Mrs. Johnson off," said the young lady mischievously.

Her companion bent over the dog and patted him, getting a low growl in response.

"What a cross brute he is! We used to be good friends, too."

"Joe likes him to be reserved with strangers."

"Am I a stranger, Louie?" And there was a tone in his voice which brought the colour to her face again.

"Nero thinks so, evidently, and I think you are very disagreeable not to tell me the news. I am so quiet here in the country, that I know nothing of what goes on."

"There has been very little going on. I never knew such a quiet week. I have been out on the bicycle alone every day after bank hours, and so many of the fellows are away that I have had double work."

"Bridget told me there was a great deal of sickness in town, and that lots of people were going away. You look very well."

"I never was better in my life! I feel as if a weight had been lifted from my heart."

He spoke impulsively, and said the last words almost against his will.

"Well, there's something strange about you to-day. Were you as peculiar at the 'at home'?"

"Yes, I was a little peculiar," he said sheepishly.

"Poor Mrs. Johnson, after going to so much trouble!"

"I wasn't rude to Mrs. Johnson, I hardly spoke to her—I say, that's a splendid looking horse in that field."

"Whom were you rude to, then?" she inquired laughingly.

"Katie Watkins, since you ask me," and he met her glance a little defiantly.

"I am sorry I asked you rude questions, Charley, and I don't know why I was so inquisitive," answered the girl humbly. Then she continued with an attempt at carelessness, "I dare say it is not so very serious though, for Miss Watkins is sure to forgive and forget, so I don't suppose there's much harm done."

"There is no harm done, Louie; but I don't think Miss Watkins will ever forgive me."

"Why, what ever did you say to her?—but you're losing your afternoon's ride."

"I told her I proposed to her because she had money," answered the young man with a frown upon his face and a heightened colour, while he looked straight before him.

"Oh, Charley! how could you say such a thing? You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"I don't know how I said it. She was asking me sentimental questions, and I told her the truth. I was ashamed of myself at the time."

"If you told her so, I am sure she would forgive you. She knows you care for her now."

"But I don't care for her, Louie, and that's what I told her. I told her I never cared for any one but you."

Louie's face was a study.

"Go away this minute! You've no right to speak to me like this," and the delicate hand which held the dog collar trembled.

"I didn't mean to speak this way, or to mention poor Katie at all," replied the young man with a deeper blush, "but you asked me questions, and I had to answer them as I answered hers the other day. I can't help being a fool, and I don't know what's got into me."

"Well, go away now, please, and then there'll be no more harm done," she said with a great effort to be calm.

"Don't call it harm that these wretched mistakes are put right. Now that so much has been said, give me a little hope. Can you ever care for me, Louie?" he pleaded with his very heart in his eyes.

"I do care for you now—Oh! go away. I didn't think you could be so hateful."

"Hateful! Don't say that. You don't hate me."

"Yes, I do." Her lips were quivering and her eyes full of tears, but she would rather have died than give way.

The happy light faded from her companion's eyes for a moment, and then he asked:—

"How can you hate me and care for me at the same time?"

"I don't know—I wish to be alone, Charley." The way in which she said his name gave him courage, and he said in a low voice:—

"But you do care for me a little, don't you? Will you ever love me and forgive me for all—for being such a contemptible wretch?"

"Yes—Oh! do go away."

He came very near instead, but she shrank from him, and Nero

growled again.

"Just listen to me one minute, Louie, and then I'll go."

He leant against his bicycle while he spoke, and she waited with the faithful dog by her side.

"You know, I was always an extravagant fool, for before father lost so much money I had everything I wished for. When I came here to the bank my salary was small, and after a time father got tired of paying my debts, and he told me I'd have to be independent of him and marry a rich woman. Poor mother urged me to do the same, for she thought I never could be economical. But I *never, never* would have thought of such a thing, only that idiot Lightbourne was sweet on you, and you seemed to encourage him and were so cool to me, that I thought I had nothing to wait for. I never had a happy moment while I was engaged to Katie, except when I forgot it now and then, and I had every intention of breaking it off when I got an opportunity. Of course, I am sorry for the way it came about, but it's a good thing over for both of us." He paused out of breath, and nervous from his long harangue, and looked at her.

"Yes—but go away now."

"Do you want me to go?"

"Yes."

His face fell at this.

"Shall I go forever?"

"Oh! no," and she raised her eyes to his face as she said the word quickly.

"Then I may come back in a little while and we shall be good friends—more than friends?"

"Yes—but good-bye now," and she held out her hand.

He took it in his own and held it for a moment or two, while Nero glance inquiringly from the young man to the maiden, as if trying to understand what it all meant.

Louie watched her lover as he mounted his bicycle and sped away under the trees, and then she and Nero turned into the gate, for she had reached her home before they parted.

CHAPTER VI.

CHARLEY CLEMENT did not allow very much time to elapse before he availed himself of Miss Louisa Forest's permission to call again, and by degrees Nero got quite accustomed to him, and so did all the rest of the family. Of course, the epidemic had passed away by that time, and things were beginning to adjust themselves again after it.

The engagement was not a very long one either, as speedy promotion in the bank came to Mr. Clement, owing to the departure of so many of the clerks in the prevailing panic, and before very long he was "in a position to marry." It was at the house of the newly-married couple that I spent some of my happiest hours while in Edgevale.

They were rather reticent on the subject of the epidemic, and Mrs. Clement always coloured up at the mention of it, especially if her brother Joe happened to be present, while her husband would laugh and turn the conversation.

It was not always an easy thing to turn the conversation if Mr. Temple were holding forth, for he was never tired of discussing the trouble from its cause, which he attributed to earthquakes and not to microbes, to its effects, which he declared ought to be as beneficial to all as it had been to him. He generally closed these long harangues with :—

"And that's how I came to marry Sophia."

He intends to be prepared if it should come again, and to that end keeps himself in a state of aggressive truthfulness, which is very trying to any one not in a robust state of health. He is a very kind husband in his way, but still Mrs. Temple has a good deal to put up

with. He is anxious that she, too, should be fortified against another attack, and so is constantly taking her up if she says anything which he thinks smacks of insincerity. In that way he applies a sort of moral vaccination, as he maintains that if one is thoroughly inoculated with truth, there is no danger of the graver trouble of unwilling frankness with entire loss of reserve.

Mrs. Temple used to be called "Sophia" in her maiden days, but now her husband declares that to shorten her baptismal name is a species of insincerity that he cannot tolerate.

I have often heard him interrupt her when she was engaged in conversation with a visitor.

"Sophia, are you *quite* sure your statement is correct?" or, "Be accurate, Sophia!"

Sometimes if he heard her indulging in any commonplace civility, he would say, warningly:—

"Don't say anything you don't mean, my dear."

She generally received these reminders with a faint smile, sometimes remarking to her friends that it was just "Edward's way."

There is another person who was continually discussing the epidemic, and that is Mrs. Jordan, the proprietress of the house in which I boarded, which house, as I remarked in the first chapter, had been occupied by some of the worst cases.

She did not take the happy view of the case that Mr. Temple did, as it had deprived her suddenly of her most paying boarders, and she had never done so well since.

"Why my house should be blamed, sir, I don't see," she would say with tears in her voice if not in her eyes. "There was many took bad in the town besides my boarders. They do say as all disease these days comes from microbes, and I'm sure I never had anything like *that* in my house. The worst I ever had was a few moths, and I always doused every one well with canfir. Never a cockroach or *any* thing made a home here, and it's taking the bread out of the widow's

and fatherless' mouths to say it was my house done it. It was no little insects started folks telling on themselves like that!"

"These things are carried in the air," I said.

"Then they never got into *my* house. I'm not one for draughts. I like to make my boarders comfortable."

"Yes, I'm sure your boarders caught the disease elsewhere."

This soothed her, and she continued in a different strain for a few minutes.

"It was the solemnest time ever I passed through, for there was a whole week I hardly said a word. Why, there's lots hasn't been right in their heads since, sir. Whenever I think of it, when I'm not feeling quite myself, I just goes into the parlour and I summons up all my sins. I declare, I've bin afraid to open my mouth ever since."

I remarked here, that I had been taught that true courage consists in doing our duty in spite of fears.

"That's just what the Reverend Mr. Chester says, sir, and I'm sure he'd tell you in a minute that it was no fault of mine that the Jenningses was took so bad."

"I'm sure he would," I said, trying to escape by edging nearer the door.

"It was their inside consciences made them say the things they did. Oh! they said the awfulest things. I could tell you lots," and she looked wistfully.

However, an engagement made it impossible for me to hear more.

The inhabitants of Edgevale speak of it as having gone down in a great measure since the trouble, but there are others who see signs of steady improvement, and say that there is a good deal of business done in a quiet way. All agree that it is a delightful place to live in, and extremely healthy. I can vouch for the latter, as the benefit I derived from my short stay there was wonderful, and I feel strongly tempted to accept Mr. and Mrs. Clement's cordial invitation to visit them next summer.

